The voice inside

A practical guide to coping with hearing voices

by Paul Baker

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Foreword

Why we have written this guide
This guide has been written by the Hearing Voices Network as an introduction to a new way of thinking about "hearing voices". Hearing voices can be a very disturbing experience, both for the person who hears voices and family and friends. To date, very little has been written about this experience and its meaning, usually it is regarded as a symptom of a mental illness and is not talked about because it is a socially stigmatising experience. In this guide we ask what is it like to hear voices, why does it start and how can people cope better with this experience? The information in this guide is based on research and practical work carried out in the Netherlands and the UK over the last seventeen years, which for the first time comes directly from the real experts, the voice hearers themselves.

Who is this guide for?
This guide is targeted at voice hearers, family and friends, as well as being of interest to professionals working with voice hearers. We hope that when you read the guide you will be interested in finding out more. If you would like to, you can join the Hearing Voices Network and keep in touch with developments as well as supporting our work.

Acknowledgments
This guide is based on the publication 'Hearing Voices' written by Sarah Bell of the Oxford Hearing Voices Group and includes information that can be found in the book Accepting voices (1993) written by Professor Marius Romme and Sandra Escher, published by Mind publications. Our special thanks go to all the members of the Hearing Voices Network and Sarah Bell, without whom this guide could not have been written.

Paul Baker

1. Introduction.

How work on the hearing voices experience has developed.

How did it start?
The first UK Hearing Voices Group was formed in 1988. It began as a small planning group originating in Manchester, inspired by the pioneering work of Professor Marius Romme, a psychiatrist from Maastricht in the Netherlands, and the Dutch self help group Foundation Resonance which was established through this work. Members of the UK group have visited Maastricht many times and attended conferences organised by the Foundation and in return have hosted visits by the Dutch workers. In 1989 the Manchester group organised a speaking tour in the North of England for Marius Romme, Sandra Escher (science journalist) and Anse Streefland (a non-patient voice hearer and Chair of Resonance). The meetings were very well attended by voice hearers, their relatives, and interested professionals. This has become a regular annual visit. Knowledge of the work has been spread by the publication of articles in specialist magazines and journals, local newspapers and the national media and is now the subject of the book Accepting voices published by Mind publications in 1993. This contact has continued to develop over the last nine years and in August 1995 the first international conference on the subject was held in the Netherlands.

What is the traditional belief about Hearing Voices?
Firstly, hearing voices has been regarded by clinical psychiatry as an auditory hallucination and as a symptom of conditions such as schizophrenic disorders, manic depression and psychosis. The usual treatment - major tranquilliser - is administered in order to reduce the delusions and hallucinations. However, not everyone responds to this type of treatment.

Secondly, there are many people in the UK who hear voices, some of whom cope with their voices well without psychiatric intervention. This

fact has been neglected. This guide asks if there is another way of thinking about voices?

Hearing Voices - A New Approach
Marius Romme (Professor of Social Psychiatry at the University of Limburg, Maastricht) in association with the UK Hearing Voices Network carried out research over nine years in the Netherlands and the UK and in his words:

"What this research shows is that we must accept that the voices exist. We must also accept that we cannot change the voices. They are not curable, just as you cannot cure left-handedness - human variations are not open to cure - only to coping. Therefore to assist people to cope we should not give them therapy that does not work. We should let people decide for themselves what helps or not. It takes time for people to accept that hearing voices is something that belongs to them."

2. What it is

What does it feel like to hear voices?

It's hard to explain
It is difficult to explain what it is like to hear "voices", particularly if you have never heard voices yourself. The word vocation, for instance means to "follow a calling", in other words to hear a voice and act on it. This is not what most people mean when they say they have a vocation, but that is the root meaning of the word. Indeed, many historically important people claimed to have heard a voice that acted as their inspiration (see Some facts about voice hearing: 1). For voice hearers, the voices might be present all day and have the effect of preventing them from doing things in their daily life. Voices might also punish the voice hearer if they do not do what the voice wants them to. Hearing voices is often regarded as dangerous because "voices" tell people to commit murders and to harm themselves, and there are sensational examples of this. It would seem that to hear voices makes you either a saint or a mad man - but is this always the case?

Some facts about voice hearing: 1

Some famous people who claimed they heard voices:
Socrates, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, Swedenborg, Carl Jung, Anthony Hopkins, Zoe Wannamaker, and Ghandi.

In a nutshell
There are many prejudices and difficulties to overcome if one attempts to explain. However, the experience of hearing voices is not as alien an experience as it is generally thought to be. Firstly, it may be the same as hearing a voice in the normal way through your ears, the difference

being that the "voice" has no physical cause. But like normal voices there is variety, and every experience has its differences. For example; leaving a party on their say so; not being able to talk about the voices; becoming silent, and as a result, isolated from other people. You may think you have never experienced this, but are you sure? (see Some facts about voice hearing: 2) You may have had the experience of hearing someone call your name only to find that there is no one there. Indeed, research shows that, especially for people recently bereaved, it is not an uncommon experience to hear the voice of the recently deceased person. That is not the only explanation of what it is like. As well as hearing voices through the ears, people also hear voices as if they are thoughts entering the mind from somewhere outside themselves. This is not the same as a suddenly inspired idea, which people usually recognise as coming from themselves, rather the thoughts are not their own and would seem to come from outside their own consciousness, like telepathy.

A good example of this is the experience of recalling a rhyme or tune, which you find yourself repeating unconsciously under your breath and which keeps going through your head again and again. You can even find yourself humming it. You never took a decision to start thinking of it and it is difficult to stop thinking about it. The difference between the tune and "voice thought" which appears as words in your mind is that it may go on to speak coherently to you and even engage you in conversation. You, yourself are not responsible for it and you have no idea what this "voice" is going to say next.

Thoughts without words. Visions, smells, tastes and dreams...
There are many different ways to hear voices. Voices can be experienced inside the head, from outside the head, or even in the body. It may be one voice or many voices. The voice may talk to you or about you. There are other ways to hear voices, some of them make the phrase "hearing voices" a poor description and perhaps one day we will have to come up with a better one - because it is never the same for everyone. Some people, for instance, experience non-verbal thoughts, images and visions, tastes, smells and touch. All with no physical cause and all sensations they did not call into being themselves.

Voices can be like dreams. We all dream and experience words, images, and even sensations. When we are bored we can drift off and have a short dream. When we dream all sorts of strange things can happen to

us, but we still believe they're really happening to us. Hearing voices can be like that - a waking dream - but something that is experienced as real.

Some facts about voice hearing: 2

Voice hearing is not an uncommon experience.
Many people hear voices and have never been a psychiatric patient, this is already a well known but neglected fact.

It has been known for some time that a high percentage of the general population experience brief and occasional voices, particularly at times of bereavement, divorce and separation. It is also the case for people in extreme circumstances, for instance, 80 per cent of those who have endured torture have hallucinated during their ordeal (Amnesty International) and the phenomenon is also seen amongst long-distance yachtsmen (Bennett, 1972). In cases like these, there is no evidence of the presence of mental illness - indeed, often quite the contrary.

More recent epidemiological research in Baltimore, in a population of 15,000 people, found that 10 - 15 per cent of those interviewed reported that they had heard voices over a long period of time, only a third of those interviewed reported experiencing negative effects (Y. Tien).

Further research in 1991 revealed that many cases of hearing voices did not meet the criteria for a psychiatric diagnosis (Eaton). Significantly, Romme's latest research of both non-patient and patient voice hearers showed that both groups hear negative and positive voices at about the same level. The difference is mainly in how the two groups react to the voices, with the non-patients not experiencing fear of the voices and experiencing far less upset from them than the patients.

3. What the voices say

What do the voices tell you and what can they do?

Lots of different voices
What do voices say? What messages do they bring? Usually there is not just one "voice" that says the same sort of things all the time. There can be a number of voices that may be different from each other. One could say pleasant things and be on your side while another might not. Sometimes a voice can have a complete personality and be instantly recognised by the person hearing the voice as some particular person, dead or alive, or some known spirit or being such as God or the Devil. Other voices may not have much of a personality and the person hearing what is said may not put it down to some particular person or being. Hearing the "voice" is like hearing random snatches of conversation.

The worst news
Some "voices" are more pleasant then others. The less pleasant ones may abuse the person hearing them, saying that this person is no good, of no account, evil, stupid, worthless. They may say this sort of thing monotonously and continually. The voices may also give people orders that they felt they have to obey because the voices control the person's body. For example, the voices might also cause them to have a fit, or experience pain.

Still not good
Alternatively, the voices could simply be constantly or occasionally interrupting with meaningless and valueless comments, such as "that's not a good idea", "that's not going to work", "he's one of them" and so on. The voices may also discuss something with apparent omniscience and wisdom - apparently they know everything - but the voice hearer can find that the information is false. For example, the voices tell you that if you send someone a letter asking for something, that person will do what you want. When it does not happen it can be very disillusioning.

The good news
There can be a pleasant side to hearing voices. Sometimes the apparent wisdom is real and the voices, or some of them, can seem intelligent. Voice hearers report that they have been told things they did not know or could not work out for themselves and the voices have been of real assistance. For some people this experience is considered a gift, something that is like a valuable insight or even extra sensory perception (ESP), and the voices can be trusted. Voices can be intelligent, witty, funny and incisive. They can in themselves be a coping mechanism. What the voices say corresponds with the effect that the social and emotional world is having on the voice hearer. The voices will often comment on how the voice hearer is experiencing the world and in this way the voices can be a defence mechanism against overwhelming or forbidden feelings. Voices are often related to life history, such as recent or childhood trauma and the voices speak of powerlessness and injustice.

Some facts about voice hearing: 3

Three phases found among people who hear voices

The startling phase

- Most voice hearers describe the onset of the experience as being quite sudden, startling and anxiety provoking, and can vividly remember the precise moment they first heard a voice.
- The age of the onset of the initial experience of voices varies widely, as does the intensity of the startling phase, which appears to be most severe when it occurs during adolescence. The confusion seems to be less when voices are heard from an early age, or did not make an appearance until later in adulthood (In a survey 6 per cent heard voices before the age of 6; 10 per cent between 10 and 20; 74 per cent after 20).
- Voices are often triggered by traumatic or emotional events such as accidents, divorce or bereavement, illnesses, psychotherapy sessions.
- The impact of the voices fall into two types:
  ❍ Some people perceive the voices as helpful and they evoke a feeling of recognition. These people feel the purpose of the voices is

strengthening them and raising their self-esteem. The voices are experienced as positive and as an understandable aspect of their internal selves.

❍ Others experience the voices as aggressive and negative from the very beginning. For these people the voices are hostile and are not accepted as part of themselves. They suffer from negative voices that can cause chaos in their minds, demanding so much attention that communication with the outside world is extremely difficult.

The phase of organisation: coping with the voices

- Voice hearers often become confused by their voices and want to escape from them. For some, this urge lasts only a short time (weeks or months), for others, it can be many years. However, to come to terms with the voices on any level or to organise them successfully, requires some form of acceptance to take place. Denying the voices does not work. During this phase, voice hearers understandably seek ways of controlling or coping with the voices, strategies include:-
  - ignoring the voices (distraction)
  - listening to them selectively
  - entering into willing dialogue with them
  - making specific appointments with them
- Attempts at distraction and ignoring rarely work, although this is a strategy many voice hearers attempt, it seems the effort involved often leads to a severe restriction of life style. Unsurprisingly, initial feelings of panic and powerlessness are replaced with a period of anger at the voices, this anger does not appear to be part of a useful coping strategy. The most useful strategy described by voice hearers is to select the positive voices and listen and talk only to them, and to try to understand them.
- An important element in coping successfully with voices is to accept them. This appears to be related to a process of growth towards taking responsibility for one's own decisions. You have to learn to think in a positive way about yourself, your voices, and your own problems.
- Another strategy is to set limits and structure the contact with the voices, sometimes accompanied by rituals or repeated actions.

The phase of stabilization

People can and do learn to cope with their voices and find a kind of equilibrium. In this state of balance, people consider the voices as part of themselves and their lives, and capable of a positive influence.

During this phase, the individual is able to choose between following the advice of the voices or their own ideas, and can say "I hear voices and I'm happy about it".

NB: The information in this section is taken from the results of questionnaires sent to voice hearers and from subsequent interviews carried out over ten years (see Accepting voices).

What voices do

Voices can vary from the very pathological and undesirable to being considered a faculty or gift. Many people, even those troubled by their voices would not like to stop hearing voices - voices may be pathological for some people but they may also fill a useful psychological function.

4. How to zap voices

How do you zap a voice?

How to zap voices you don't like
What do you do about voices that are not on your side, which denigrate you and insult you, or interrupt your thoughts, or pander detrimental advice and tell you to do stupid things? The first thing to realise is that although the voice may be intruding on your consciousness, that does not mean that you should blindly do what it says. Would you rush off and commit murder if someone told you to? Absolutely not. People who hear voices have the same right to self-determination as anyone else and you can tell the voices exactly that. If some of the voices are pleasant and friendly, then clearly you chat to them, and not to the ones who are not. You can tell the unpleasant voices that you find them neither pleasant nor useful, and that you have no reason to tolerate them unless they are both.

What about malevolent voices who can cause acute mental pain and can order you to do things (like staying in and avoiding people)? One solution is to remove as much stress from your life as possible. Not only does stress increase the voices, but it makes them say more unpleasant things. Secondly, do not ignore the voices as they tend to get more aggressive, however at the same time do not let them get away with running your life without your permission.

Why listen?
Why should you listen to this advice about zapping voices, especially as this view of voices is not shared by most psychiatrists? You should listen for two reasons, firstly the advice has been developed from ten years worth of research into the experience of voice hearers by psychiatrists and psychologists in the UK and the Netherlands and, most significantly, the lessons learnt have been consumer tested by voice hearers (see Some facts about voice hearing: 3).

5. The movement

Professor Marius Romme gets a shock and founds a movement

An unusual patient
The starting point for this new way of thinking about hearing voices came at the suggestion of one of Romme's patients, Patsy Haagan. She said to him: "You believe in a God that no-one can see, so why don't you believe in the voices that I at least can definitely hear, and are real to me?" Patsy had got her ideas about voices from the theories of an American psychologist, Julian Jaynes who wrote a book called 'The Origins of Consciousness and the Breakdown of the Bi-cameral Mind'.

The voices talk to the ancient Greeks
The Iliad is a book written by the ancient poet, Homer. It tells of the Trojan Wars, a war caused by the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen. She left her husband and ran off to Troy with Paris. Her husband pursued her with all the armies of Greece and Homer wrote the Iliad about the war that followed. Homer frequently describes some Greek god or goddess appearing to a warrior in the middle of the Trojan War and telling him to do something. Julian Jaynes argues persuasively in his book that, when that happened it was not a metaphorical experience but a real one. The warrior really saw the goddess and heard her words. Jaynes believes that up until about 1300 BC, and before the development of written language, hearing voices was common to all humanity and the experience was all but eradicated by what we now know as consciousness. The people who hear voices today are carriers of an evolutionary residue from this ancient time.

Patsy wins
Romme accepted Patsy's voices and as a consequence invited other people to talk about their experience, and found that although they could talk about their experience they could not help each other. Then Marius and Patsy appeared on a Dutch television programme and talked about voice hearing, asking for people who heard voices to phone in. 450 people rang, and of those 150 people said they were able to cope

with their voices without assistance from psychiatry, indeed in some cases were happy to hear voices. This finding was most surprising and it led to a crucial question. Perhaps the techniques employed by those who coped well with their voices could be used by those who did not? Marius began the study of voice hearers experiences, which continues to this day. He did two more things. He assisted the founding of a movement of voice hearers and organised a conference in order to encourage a broader discussion to change the attitude of society and to try to change the way the voice hearers were treated by the medical profession and especially psychiatrists.

6. What does this research mean for voice hearers?

The implications for psychiatric treatment and a hope of recovery

The traditional medical view about voices
Psychiatrists, nurses, and other professionals have been taught to regard voices as an auditory hallucination, it is usually thought to be part of the symptoms that make up illnesses like schizophrenia. The treatment for people troubled by their voices is most often drugs (like neuroleptics), which can in some cases reduce the anxiety caused by the voices but at the cost of making the person feel sluggish or restless; drugs which may even, it is said, leave the taker with permanent brain damage if taken in high doses over long periods of time. There are many theories held by psychiatry about what may cause voices, many of them presume that it is part of a psychosis and that it might be caused by some kind of genetic flaw. Generally though, it is presumed that there is not a lot an individual can do for themselves to cope with the voices. Indeed, professionals are taught not to engage voice hearers about the content of their voice experience as this is thought to be "buying in" to the patients delusions and not helpful. Most often professionals will seek to distract the voice hearer from their voices. As you will realise by now this is not a helpful approach. To be told that the voices are just a symptom of an illness, when those voices are as real to you as anything else in the physical world is very disempowering. For example:

George hears voices continuously. The voices are sometimes pleasant, but at other times they say unpleasant things and they interrupt him when he would prefer to concentrate on something happening in the purely physical world, such as an interesting meeting. Often he tries to discuss these voices with members of the medical profession. He wants to discuss what the voices say and the significance of the voices, but he is told they are just a symptom of his illness, to be ignored as best he may. However, he does hear voices that talk about things deeply

relevant and meaningful to him. How can he believe that these voices are part of an illness and of no more significance than a sore throat? In an environment where there is active discouragement to talk about the voices from the medical advisors, George is being asked to accept that his own experiences are not relevant.

What Romme says
Romme's research has come up with a very different answer than the traditional psychiatric view described above. The reason for this, is that Marius developed his understanding of the voice hearing experience by talking to voice hearers themselves and asking them the basic and obvious questions such as: When did the voices start? How many voices do you hear? How often do you hear them? What do you think the voice represents? What do they say? What helps? etc. Amazingly, these questions had never been asked before in a systematic way and the direct subjective experience of the voice hearer had been largely ignored. Romme came to the conclusion that to regard hearing voices as part of an illness and to ignore the content of the voice hearing experience is largely unhelpful and counter productive - in that ignoring the voices (and long term use of psychiatric drugs) can make the voices worse. It may also be an inaccurate analysis, for outside the world of psychiatry, there are many people who hear voices and manage to live with the experience. Marius concludes that it is not the fact that you hear voices that is the problem, it is the way you deal with them - and further that psychosis, like neurosis, is firmly related to an individual's life history.

Some facts about voice hearing: 4

Implications for mental health workers
It would be extremely worthwhile for people working in the mental health professions to examine in greater detail which frames of reference and coping strategies seem to be the most useful to patients who hear voices; we might, by doing so, be able to support and assist voice hearers much more effectively in their attempts to deal with their experiences.

The main steps in this process are the following:

- To accept the voice hearer's experience of the voices. The voices are

often felt as more intense and real than sensory perceptions.

- To try to understand the different languages used by the voice hearer to describe and account for their experiences, as well as the language spoken by the voices themselves. There is often a world of symbols and feelings involved; for example, a voice might speak of light and dark when expressing love and aggression.
- To consider helping the individual to communicate with the voices. This may involve issues of differentiating between good and bad voices and of accepting the voice hearer's own negative emotions. This kind of acceptance may make a crucial contribution to the promotion of self-esteem.
- To encourage the voice hearer to meet other people with similar experiences and to read about hearing voices, in order to help overcome isolation and taboo.

For mental health workers these steps may demand a considerable enlargement of clinical perspective, and should broaden the generally accepted theories within the profession.

7. The Hearing Voices Network

Building up an information and support network

Helping to cope with Voices
The Network has been set up to assist Voice Hearers to find their own ways of coming to terms with their voices by showing that:

- There are various explanations for the experience of hearing voices which have been shown to empower voice hearers, enabling them to live with the experience in a positive way.
- There are people who find ways of coping with their voices other than the use of drugs and who have found alternative explanations for their voices outside of the psychiatric model which have assisted people in coping with their "voice" experience. The knowledge gained by people who can cope with their voices can be beneficially shared.
- People who hear voices can be assisted in developing ways of coping better with their voices by participating in self help groups in which they can share experiences, explanations and methods of coping and benefit from mutual support.

Bringing about change
People who hear voices, their families and friends can gain great benefit from destigmatising the experience. This can lead to greater tolerance and understanding of voice hearing. This can be achieved through promoting more positive explanations that give people a framework for developing their own ways of coping and by raising awareness about the experience in society as a whole.

The networks aims to:
1) Provide support to people who hear voices and to build up a better understanding of the experience alongside workers, families and friends. To provide therapists and families with information that will help people to cope more effectively with their voices.
2) Set up self-help groups of voice hearers to share experiences and discuss strategies for coping with voices.
3) To show that the real problem is not so much the hearing of voices

as the inability to cope with the experiences, and to educate society about the meaning of voices and to reduce ignorance and anxiety.
4) To demonstrate the wide variety of experiences and their origins, and the possible approaches to coping. To develop a range of non-medical ways of assisting people to cope with their voices.
5) Bring together voice hearers who have not been in contact with psychiatric services with those people experiencing distress.

What the Network does
In 1988 we decided to establish a network of voice hearers and interested individuals. In the last fourteen years the Network has grown and now has a national office based in Manchester.

- **Membership**
  In the last year our membership has grown to over 1500 people (at Nov 2002) made up of voice hearers, friends and relatives, interested workers and members of the public.

- **Newsletter**
  Members receive the regular Hearing Voices newsletter. The Newsletter was first produced in 1990, and is free for people who join the network. The Newsletter provides information on Network activities, useful publications and personal accounts from voice hearers.

- **Information**
  As well as producing a newsletter, we also publish an information pamphlet and have published pamphlets including reports on our annual national conferences, a critique of the Dutch research, and the development of the work in the Netherlands. Information about the experience has also been published in a range of popular and specialist magazines and was the subject of a BBC TV Horizon documentary programme broadcast in April 1995.

- **Self Help Groups**
  There are now self-help groups established in England, Wales and Scotland, with active groups in many parts of the country such as Oxford, London, Fife, Newcastle...

- **Conferences and Seminars**
  Over the last five years we have held conferences and seminars

for Voice Hearers on their own and other meetings for Voice Hearers, relatives and workers. We also provide speakers for meetings throughout the UK.

8. Talk about it: a hearing voices checklist

Talking about voices can really help. The following key points provide a useful guide to opening up discussion about the voice hearing experience.

1. Open discussion
People who hear voices find themselves having to deal with an other world that may overwhelm them and claim their attention to the exclusion of all else. As a result the power of reason may be virtually extinguished, at least initially, making it impossible for those concerned to go about their daily lives without being affected by such a penetrating and confusing experience.

Open discussion with others offers the most important means of creating some kind of order in the attempt to come to terms with these experiences. In particular, communication helps people to accept their voices; as a result self-confidence is improved, freeing them from isolation and reaffirming their sense of involvement with those around them. Mutual communication between voice hearers gives the opportunity to share similar experiences, using a common language and to learn from one another.

2. Recognising patterns
People who hear voices say it is very important to discuss voices in the same way one might talk about disagreeable relatives. In the process, it is possible to learn to recognise their games and tricks, as well as their more pleasant aspects, and to identify patterns that are specific to given situations. Such knowledge can help the voice hearer to be better prepared for any subsequent onset of the voices.

3. Easing anxiety
Most people who hear voices initially imagine that they are alone in doing so. This can make the experience anxious and unpleasant and also produces feelings of shame or the fear of going mad. Anxiety often

leads to the avoidance of situations which might trigger the hearing of voices, and this avoidance seriously blocks self-development. Thus some voice hearers cannot go to the supermarket or socialise at parties. Such levels of anxiety severely restrict freedom of movement, and strategies of avoidance often seem only to exacerbate the problem.

4. Finding a theoretical perspective

Like professionals in the field, voice hearers themselves look for a theoretical explanation to account for the existence of their voices. A personal approach to understanding or a specific frame of reference can be helpful and there are many disparate perspectives used by voice hearers. These include psychodynamic, mystical, parapsychology and medical models. Whatever the perspective adopted, some kind of explanatory theory does appear to be essential to the development of a coping strategy. Unless some meaning is attributed to the voices, it is very difficult to begin to organise one's relationship with them in order to reduce anxiety. Generally speaking, perspectives that discourage the individual from seeking mastery of the voices tend to yield the least positive results. Interpreting ones voices as the manifestation of electronic influences might be one such example. The explanation offered by biological psychiatry may also be unhelpful in terms of coping strategies, given that, it too, places the phenomenon beyond one's personal grasp.

5. Acceptance

In the process of developing one's own point of view and taking responsibility for oneself, the essential first step is acceptance of the voices as belonging to me. This is of the utmost importance - and also one of the most difficult steps to take.

6. Recognising meaning

Voices can express what the voice hearer is feeling or thinking, for instance aggression or fear about an event or a relationship. When voices offer information in this way the challenge posed by their presence is often less significant than the reason for the anger or fear. When the voices express such views and feeling it can be valuable to discuss the nature of the messages.

7. Positive aspects

When people hear voices that are truly malicious - ridiculing or belittling others, or even abusing the hearers until they are driven to

injure themselves - it may be difficult to persuade them to accept the existence of a positive, helpful dimension to the experience. Contact with others can lead to the surprising discovery that positive voices do exist, and to the realisation that these may arise, or be detected, as a result of a proper acceptance of the hearer's own negative side.

8. Structuring contact
Imposing a structure on the relationship with the voices can help minimise the common feelings of powerlessness. It can be extremely valuable in helping people to see that they can set their own limits and restrain the voices from excessive intrusion.

9. More effective use of medication
Sharing experiences also enables people to get to know what medicines others are using, how useful these are, and what their side effects may be. It is important, for example, to know whether a particular medicine has been found helpful in reducing the hearing of voices or in easing the associated anxiety and confusion.

10. Family understanding
Sharing knowledge about voice hearing with families and friends can be very helpful. If a person's family and friends can accept the voices they can be more supportive, this can make the life of the voice hearer easier, improving their sense of confidence in social situations.

11. Personal Growth
Almost all voice hearers who have learned to adjust to their experiences report that, with hindsight, the process has contributed to their personal growth. Personal growth can be defined as recognising what one needs in order to live a fulfilled life, and knowing how to achieve these ends; it could be described as a process of emancipation.

12. Watch out
Communicating about voices does have its disadvantages, exposing oneself can make one feel very vulnerable. Some voice hearers find great difficulty in opening up about their experiences, though it can be easier with other voice hearers. In particular, voice hearers who have never been psychiatric patients need real courage to face a world that will all too often call them mad when they talk about their lives. It can be hard to see what would be gained by doing so, and often their only motive is to help others who are unable to cope with their own voices.

Another possible drawback to disclosures is that the voices may occasionally become temporarily more acute. All in all, though, the advantages definitely outweigh the disadvantages. Finally, one must always be wary of advice and explanations that are purely personal convictions and make no allowance for any other interpretation. It is most important to be fully aware of the wide variety of individual situations and circumstances. The least hazardous advice tends to be that which may serve to increase the individual's own influence over their voices, rather than intensify powerlessness.

SELF DETERMINATION AND SELF KNOWLEDGE ARE THE KEY WORDS

9. Useful contacts

Hearing Voices Network – confidential helpline and information about local groups - 0845 122 8642 - *www.hearing-voices.org*

Intervoice – the international community for voice hearing - *www.intervoiceonline.org*

MIND - information line - 0845 766 0163 and online resources - *www.mind.org.uk*

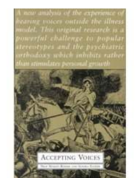
BIVO - a comprehensive online index of local resources - *www.bivo.nhs.uk*

Focus Line - free telephone support for anyone affected by mental health issues - 0800 027 2127

Samaritans - National - 08457 90 90 90
Birmingham - 666 6644
Solihull - 704 2255

10. Further reading

Books

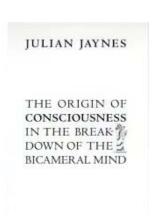


Accepting voices by Marius Romme and Sandra Escher
Mind Publications. ISBN: 1874690138
With this book the authors triggered a seismic shift in the understanding of voice-hearing. They put the powerful case for accepting and validating people's own interpretations of their voices, and showed how such interpretations often enabled people to live with them far more effectively than bio-medical approaches.



Making Sense of Voices: A Guide for Mental Health Professionals Working with Voice-Hearers by Marius Marius Romme and Sandra Escher. Mind publications. ISBN: 1874690863

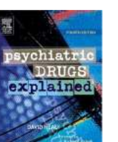
This is the follow-up to Romme and Escher's *Accepting Voices.* The book illustrates that many people hear voices and that not everyone has recourse to psychiatry, but that there are ways of coping which enable people to come to terms with their experience. It focuses on techniques to deal with voices, emphasizing that personal growth should be stimulated rather than inhibited.



The origin of consciousness in the breakdown of the bicameral mind by Julian Jaynes. Houghton Mifflin ISBN: 0395563526
At the heart of this book is the idea that human consciousness did not begin far back in animal evolution, but is a learned process brought into being as recently as 3000 years ago out of an earlier hallucinatory mentality. The implications of this theory extend into all aspects of man's psychology, history, culture, religion and even future.



Recovery: An Alien Concept by Ron Coleman
Handsell ISBN190319900x
Ron Coleman's book is a powerful and unique view of recovery from mental illness. It is a challenging look at psychiatry from someone who has experienced services first hand. An inspiring read for those who have experienced distress, or those who work in the field.



Psychiatric Drugs Explained by David Healy
Churchill Livingstone ISBN 0443074143
This is a readable reference source of essential information for professionals and anyone taking psychiatric drugs. The major drug categories are listed and the clinical uses, modes of action and side-effects of drugs in each category are described.

Articles:

'Hearing Voices', Romme, M. and Escher, A. (1989) *Schizophrenia Bulletin* vol. 15, no. 2, pp.209-216

'Coping with Hearing Voices', Romme, M., Honig A., Noortboorn, E., Escher, A. (1992) *British Journal of Psychiatry*, no. 161, pp 99-103

'I Hear Voices and I'm Glad To!', Paul Baker (1990), *Critical Public Health*, No. 4,1990, pp 21-27



Reproduced from the original booklet with thanks to Paul Baker and the Hearing Voices Network.

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